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## Truckway proposal holds promise

*Amid state's financial woes, getting big rigs off highways could ease traffic, road repair costs*

Sometimes hard times can force useful innovations that would not have come about during good times. California's transportation sector is facing very hard times indeed. Traditional road funding sources have been drained to pay the state's day-to-day bills. Money is so short, some highway projects will have to be shut down.

Take a look at Highway 99, for example. Merced's main link with the outside world is a crumbling mess, with everincreasing traffic making the already overstressed road crumble even faster.

In the face of the funding crisis, Southern California transportation planners are proposing a potentially useful innovation. They want to tap private funds to build dedicated toll roads for trucks -- a whole new transportation mode that planners have dubbed "truckways." Imagine Highway 99 without the trucks -- what a different stretch of roadway it would be.

This is more than a theoretical concept. The six-county **Southern California Association of Governments** has adopted a regional transportation plan that would include the nation's first truckway. The truckway would run 142 miles from the Los Angeles port of San Pedro east to Barstow along existing freeway routes that now carry some of the highest volume of truck traffic in the nation. It would consist of four lanes, two going in each direction, and cost \$16.5 billion.

Under the plan, tax-exempt revenue bonds would be issued to finance construction of special toll lanes exclusively for trucks. Truck fees ranging anywhere from 38 cents to 80 cents a mile would pay off the bonds and finance maintenance and operation of the dedicated truck lanes that would run adjacent to, but separated by physical barriers from, the freeway.

Not only would moving trucks onto their own lanes free up road space in the other lanes for cars, but cars also would benefit from not having to maneuver around behemoth trucks that now clog freeways.

The trucking industry has opposed tolls in the past. The south state plan assumes industry officials would be open to a proposal that would allow truckers to increase productivity by introducing long doubles and triple trailers into California for the first time.

Other Western states, including Nevada and Oregon, allow long trucks now. California has wisely barred them because of safety considerations and the wear and tear heavier and longer trucks have on roadbeds. If the trucks were limited to special heavy-duty truckways separated by barriers from other traffic, the idea may make fiscal and safety sense.

Proponents will likely meet with opposition from some elements within the trucking industry, and from railroads that compete with truckers. They must overcome skepticism from environmentalists concerned about the land use and air pollution implications of truckways, and labor organizations concerned about job losses. They must gain the approval of Congress and the state Legislature. Finally, they must convince Wall Street that the idea makes economic sense.

That's going to take a long time, and a Southern California truckway won't necessarily fix Central Valley road problems, unless some of the highway funds that would have gone south are diverted here.

It is far too early to give the proposal wholehearted support. Given the hurdles, truckways may never be built in California. Still, hard times mean that at least they will be given serious consideration and analysis for the first time. With the status quo clearly unsustainable, that is progress.